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The Indian Church and Village Problems

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India's village problems in the context of the Indian Church present two aspects: one, the fundamental and theological, and the other, the practical and technological. It goes without saying that the practical and technological approach of the Church to village problems is largely determined by the strength of the Church's conviction in its fundamental approach to the theological basis of village problems.

In discussing the attitude or responsibility of the Church to village problems the biggest question therefore is: Does the Church in India—or more correctly I should say—Do the Churches in India believe that the glaring problems of village poverty, caused by unscientific agricultural practices, inefficient tools and methods used in occupational crafts, uneconomic utilization of the little money villagers have for want of co-operative effort, and a number of other so-called 'secular' problems, come under the 'spiritual' content of Christian theology? Or are these problems of 'secular work', economic rehabilitation, hygienic housing and other similar problems only marginal to, or outside the pale of the doctrine of redemption? Is redemption confined only to the soul?

KERYGMA OR SOUL EVANGELISM

The Church with its over-emphasis on *Evangelism* has placed *Kerygma*, *spiritual evangelism*, or the proclamation of the gospel of redemption of the soul from sin in the forefront of its missionary programme. *Medical evangelism*, or redemption of the body from disease, seems to come next as a handmaid. *Educational evangelism*, or redemption of the mind from ignorance, comes next. The question now is: Does the Church recognize *Economic Evangelism*, which proclaims the gospel of redemption from poverty to them that are poor in physical needs of life, deliverance to them that are captives of want, and liberty to them that are crushed under the tyranny of an unjust economic social order?

The Church, or the Church's theology, divides life into two compartments and even grades them as the *sacred* and the

secular, or the *spiritual* and the *temporal*. The spiritual and the sacred are considered as primary, and the temporal and the secular as secondary. The logical consequence of this doctrine is that there are *sacred occupations* in life that are of a higher order, as against the *secular occupations* that are of a subsidiary order.

This has given rise, I believe, to two tragedies in the life and impact of the Church on the world. First, it has produced a sense of frustration in 200 million lay members of the Church in the world, and in two-and-a-half million lay members of the Church in India, that their secular occupations, so obviously necessary in the running of God's world and even in the running of Christian Churches and Christian Missions, do not come within the purview of Christian theology and give them the inspiration and impelling power to be co-workers with God in their occupations as part of God's plan of redemption for the world. This has produced what I may call *theological caste* in the Church which has impoverished the laymen, the Church and the world.

Secondly, this compartmentalization and gradation of life in Christian theology has focused the attention of Christian missions on the *heathen soul* of the villager and blurred his emaciated body and filthy environment out of focus. Even after a century of Christian missionary work in the under-developed areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America the general condition of 'Christian villagers' is hardly better than non-Christian villagers in their physical, social and economic aspects, and the cause for this is to be sought in the theology of the Church, which may be conceived as a circular theology with the soul or the spiritual in the centre and the temporal on the circumference.

There is a third tragedy, a menacing tragedy, which is the result of the first two tragedies. The intellectual frustration of educated men on the one hand, and the economic desperation of village people on the other, have created a vacuum which is being filled with the dynamite of communistic thinking. This is based on Marxist theology, which is also circular, but with the temporal in the centre and the spiritual on the circumference—a reversal of Christian theology.

INTEGRATED DOCTRINE

We cannot ignore the fact of the completeness or the totality of human life. The spiritual and the temporal are indivisible complements, one to the other, and they have to be integrated into a total Christian theology of life. Theology is made for life and not life for theology.¹

¹ S. P. Raju: *Secular Occupations and Christian Doctrine*, NCC Review, October-November 1954.

If you will forgive a little intrusion of geometry into theology, what is needed is that instead of a circular theology with the spiritual in the centre and the temporal on the circumference, and a reversed circular theology with the temporal in the centre and the spiritual in the periphery, the two circles have to be integrated into an ellipse. An ellipse is an oval shaped figure with two centres or foci with this remarkable property, that if, from any point on the orbit, lines are drawn to the two centres, their sum is always constant, wherever the point may be. One centre may be considered to be the motivating centre of the spiritual and the other of the temporal. The man on the orbit is influenced or activated by the forces from both the centres and takes a position on the orbit that is the resultant of the combined forces from both the centres. He may be nearer to the one than the other according to his personality, circumstance and calling in life, but activated and guided by a combination of both the forces of the spiritual and the temporal.

This is an attempt at indicating an integrated doctrine of the spiritual and the temporal, which gives unity and completeness to human life avoiding the danger of compartmentalizing or grading life into the *sacred* and the *secular*. Herein probably lies a picture, imperfect though it be, of a balanced theology of God and man in relation to God, which integrates spirit and work, thus 'life giving meaning to work and work giving meaning to life'.

It will be noticed that in trying to integrate spirit and work for evolving unity and completeness in the life of man and his relation to God a similar integration of the spiritual and the temporal is assumed in the concept of God. I believe that such a concept can be established by reason and revelation.

Christians are unfortunately steeped in the popular concept taught by the Church, that God is a Spirit, and nothing but a Spirit. As a consequence of this unitary concept of God he is assumed to be profoundly innocent of any scientific knowledge regarding the matter and the forces operating in the universe, though they repeat every week that they 'believe in God . . . *Maker* of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible'.

If a scientist discovers any of these forces, science cannot put itself in competition with God, while what it has found out after laborious experimentation, measurement and reasoning, is what was already put there by God in his creative process which is still in progress. As a matter of fact the discovery was made by the mind and intuition of the scientist, which was also put there by God in his process of creating man.

When Kepler discovered the laws that governed the movement of heavenly bodies, he fell on his knees to glorify God. When Newton discovered the law of gravitation that operated in the universe, he humbled himself. Bose, who discovered that plants have feelings similar to animals, dedicated his

laboratory to the goddess of learning. Einstein, who discovered the simple mathematical law that annihilated all distinction between matter and energy, and led to the splitting of the atom, felt that 'God' must be a mathematician.

This integrated concept of God as the supreme source of creative spirit as well as the supreme source of creative work, and the relation of man to God in the realm of spirit and work, may be further illustrated by means of a simple example from elementary science. Readers will be familiar with that striking experiment for demonstrating the way iron filings arrange themselves around a magnet according to a definite law. A magnet has two poles, the north and the south. The magnet cannot be conceived except with two poles. One pole cannot exist without the other. For the magnet to be operative it needs the functioning of both the poles. Each pole is as strong and powerful as the other in influencing the magnetic field. And its whole operation is invisible. This, in a general way, represents the concept of God, as we have been setting forth above.

The concept of man and his relation to God is illustrated by the iron filings and their behaviour in the invisible magnetic field. They set themselves in a definite pattern with these characteristics: they are no more inert iron filings, but little magnets partaking of the nature and the power of the magnet. They set themselves along definite lines and exert their own forces which are resultants of the forces due to both the poles. Every magnetic line of force, however remote it may be from the magnet, always connects both the poles, indicating their combined action on every particle. This may be an imperfect illustration but a practical one to indicate the line of approach to the new concept. The magnet represents God and the two poles his dual attributes as God of the spiritual, and God of the temporal, both equal but integrated. The magnetic field represents the invisible influence of the power of God. The iron filings represent man, weak and inert on his own, but when in the magnetic field capable of absorbing power from the magnet and transmitting it to the neighbouring particles. This example from science may help us to understand the implications of the integrated concept of spirit and work.

The whole experiment may well be a scientific parable to illustrate Paul's great saying: 'It is no longer I that live, but Christ that lives in me.'

The Old Testament unfolds the revelation of a God of that description. In asking Noah to build an ark for meeting a catastrophe, he did not show himself simply as a Spirit, giving a warning to Noah and asking him to build an ark in which Noah himself was a technical expert. But God gave detailed specifications. The material for construction should be gophir wood, which was impervious and non-warping. It should be pitched inside and outside to be watertight. It should be 450 ft. long, 75 ft. broad, and 45 ft. high, with a lower, second and third

decks, so proportioned and weighed that its centre of gravity should maintain a safe equilibrium when exposed to winds and waves. This sounds like the specifications of a shipbuilding engineer!

The same kind of detailed specifications of materials, dimensions and workmanship are given to Moses for building the ark of the covenant and also the Tabernacle.

God is the Supreme Spirit, and at the same time God is the Supreme Workman. His inspiration and guidance to man is not only in the realm of the spirit, but equally also in the realm of work. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus for redeeming mankind. The same spirit was upon Isaiah to prophesy, upon Moses to lead, and upon Paul to preach. And the same spirit of the Lord was also upon Bezaleel, not to prophesy or lead or preach, but to be mastercraftsman in metal and stone and wood.

This process of revelation of the integrated concept of creative spirit and creative work goes on in the New Testament. Jesus, the Son of God, was born into a carpenter's family. He sanctified the workshop and its service to the village by making 'yokes' with such special concern and skill that they sat 'easy' on the necks of animals without hurting their humps, and their weight was so well balanced that their 'burden was light'.

This sanctification of spirit and work is the message of the Son of Man to the village working man.

DIAKONIA: TEMPORAL SERVICE

Now we turn to the second aspect: the practical approach of the Church to village problems.

All the practical service in the temporal realm, that the Church performs as an organization or expects its members to perform, comes broadly under the category of *diakonia*, and the person that is officially appointed to perform these tasks is called a *deacon*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines a *deacon* as 'appointed minister of charity, officer attending to congregation's secular affairs'.

In the Church's climate of religious thinking all of its social and economic service comes under 'charity', a 'first aid' in 'secular affairs'. According to the Church's theology, *Diakonia* is the Red Cross of *Kerygma*.

The question is: If *Kerygma* is the proclamation of the Gospel, and if *diakonia* is only ancillary to *kerygma*, does that limited gospel, the 'evangel' of evangelism, express the total content of the redemptive process of Jesus Christ as the Lord of the total life, total man, total society and total universe?

In its approach to the complexities of village problems the Church has to do some fundamental thinking; otherwise all its 'village uplift' will be fragmentary and uncoordinated, and the result will be temporary *relief* and not permanent *rehabilitation*.

These words *relief* and *rehabilitation* have meanings of such

underlying significance to our thesis that it is worth our while to make a closer study of them. The dictionary defines *relief* as 'alleviation of, or deliverance from pain, distress, anxiety, etc. ; assistance given to the poor, or to persons in special danger or difficulty'.

On the other hand in the word *rehabilitation* the prefix *re-* means 'back, with return to previous state after lapse or cessation or occurrence of opposite state or action'. And *rehabilitation* means 'restoration to privileges, reputation or proper condition'.

Relief is temporary charity ; but *rehabilitation* is permanent restoration to previous condition.

Relief in certain cases is of course necessary ; but in the general planning for meeting village problems the Church's final goal must be *not* relief, but rehabilitation.

We shall be frequently using the expression '*economic problems*' and we must define its content in the context of our present study. The dictionary defines *economics* (Greek *oikonomikos*) as 'practical science of the production and distribution of wealth, (also) condition of a country as to material prosperity'.

Our study must then be directed to the following aspects :

First : to make an investigation of *village economics*, or condition of villages 'as to material prosperity', and relate this to *diakonia*, or the Church's temporal rehabilitation of village Christians ;

Second : to evolve feasible methods of *diakonia* for improving the 'production and distribution of wealth' in the village Christian community in relation to present conditions of India ;

Third : to integrate these with *kerygma* as the proclamation of the Gospel of the 'Kingdom of God' and build up a *koinonia*, or village society, in which the 'Rule of God' is accepted as sovereign.

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

With this theological background of *kerygma*, *diakonia* and *koinonia*, let us study the practical problems of Indian villages in the context of the Indian Church.

(i) *Tension between Ruralism and Urbanism*

One of the basic problems of Indian villages, as a matter of fact of villages all round the world, is the tension between ruralism and urbanism. Ruralism and Urbanism are no longer conceived in terms of geographical location, but rather as the attitudes of mind regarding social, religious and civic inter-relationship between the individual, the family and the community. Ruralistic life has the trend of being personal, intimate, inter-dependent and co-operative, held together by rigid customary

laws and traditional obligations of the community. While there may be little personal independence, it ensures a sense of security. Ruralistic life may be broadly conceived as a family type of society. We may remind ourselves that the family is the unit of society, in which spontaneous personal concern, affection, service and sacrifice are the general operating forces in the relationship between members of the family. These are instinctive gifts of God, which need no outside motivation, and are to be preserved for the sake of community life.

On the contrary, urbanistic life has the trend of being impersonal and competitive, with a strong emphasis on personal freedom of choice; and its community life is organized on mutually accepted contractual understanding of rights and responsibilities, like a municipality, a civic association or a business company. Urbanistic life may be broadly conceived as a company type of society. In this the motivation for right conduct, fulfilment of civic duties and showing concern for others is not spontaneous and instinctive as in the family type, but depends entirely upon personal character, urge 'to be a gentleman' or for 'playing the game', when others are not watching. The agencies that produce this motivation for right conduct may be: (1) a spiritual force from within, due to the faith of religion; (2) moral pressure of public opinion due to the 'culture' of society; or (3) restraining pressure due to civic rules or government legislation.

Among the agencies that are accelerating the trend towards urbanism in villages the Church is one of the strongest. Its programme of education has removed from the villages the best brains, talent and leadership and to that extent has permanently impoverished the village potential. The non-Roman Churches of India have a population of about 6 million, out of whom about 10 per cent live in towns, with varying degrees of contact with their villages. Many of these are really urban editions of rural originals. It may be estimated that about 5 million Christians live in villages and are the subject of this study.

While there may be notable examples here and there of their being better off than other villagers, in general, their living conditions, with respect to housing, occupational crafts, poverty and other economic factors, are about the same as other village people. A considerable number migrate to towns, industrial centres and construction projects, where more often than not, they lose touch with the Church and are in difficulties of various kinds. While a number of town Churches are making efforts to look after village migrants, I have a feeling that there are thousands of such people, who have become 'Displaced Persons' with all the implications of human struggle that the ominous letters 'D.P.' indicate these days.

One of the major village problems of the Indian Church is therefore in towns. This should be the concern of town Churches, preferably on an Inter-Church basis.

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If on a liberal estimate one institution touches about 50 people, the total number touched would be about 15,000 Christians out of a total of 5 million. This is a statistical indication of the effect of Church's theology on the economics of village Christians.

(iii) *Illiteracy*

Another basic problem intimately connected with helping village people to help themselves towards rehabilitation is illiteracy.

A statistical study indicates that while the literacy percentages of Christians are higher than the average for the country, there is an appalling disparity between village Christians and town Christians. In Andhra Pradesh which has the lowest literacy among the linguistic areas of the Church of South India, it is 75 per cent for towns and 10 per cent for villages.² Other states may be better; but on the whole it may be estimated that out of 5 million about 20 per cent or one million may be literate, the other 80 per cent or 4 million being illiterate.²

Any programme of rehabilitation must therefore include a vigorous and sustained campaign for village literacy for two reasons: *first*, it is essential that village people must have direct access to the Bible, the source of inspiration and guidance for their life and work; *secondly*, they must be able to read the special literature prepared for their social and economic regeneration.

A planned effort must be made to produce in all languages attractive books and periodicals on Village Economics.³

(iv) *Community Solidarity*

Another basic problem pertaining to rehabilitation of the whole village is the need for community solidarity.

In the overall picture of the 'Mission' of the Church and its 'Missionary' programme, the removal of poverty, illiteracy and other tensions of the villages is *not* an end in itself, but a means towards the establishment of a village society, *koinonia*, that is

² S. P. Raju: *Church Statistics and their Evaluation*, NCC Review, January 1958.

³ S. P. Raju: *Christian Literature on Village Economics*, NCC Review, May 1958.

comparable to the 'Kingdom of God'. This expression has become so worn out that at one limit it may be just a theological expression for 'the state of being good'. At the other limit it may stand for an impossible Utopia of a 'Kingdom of Heaven', in which every one will be an angel. We must be realistic and practical in its application. It must mean a society in which every individual and group must make an honest effort to apply the 'Rule of God' or the 'Rule of Love' in all considerations affecting themselves and the society to which they belong. Secondly, there must be community thinking and action to shape village society in such a way as to produce community solidarity.

The Indian Church feels it has an all-India 'mission'. It consists of 6,000,000 Christians living in about 30,000 local congregations, whose spiritual and temporal needs are looked after by about 50,000 Indian workers and about 5,000 overseas workers.

There must be over 25,000 village congregations in India. The Willingen Session of the International Missionary Council (1952) recorded a most fundamental finding, when it said: '*The basic function of the Church is to build up the life of the local congregation*'—the total life including its social and economic temporalities. Every village congregation is to be built up into a virile community so that the 5 million village Christians may be 'creative minorities' set in the midst of 300 million village neighbours.

Space does not permit elaboration of a community programme, but an outline of practical measures may be indicated as including:

1. Community Study of the Bible in relation to the problems of the village, making village Christians realize that their occupational crafts are in the plan of God for the service of society; and that they are co-workers with God;
2. Community Panchayat to evolve and guide community action;
3. Community Civics including improvement to village homes and village environment;⁴
4. Community Economics including improvement of agriculture, village industries and village co-operatives.⁵

THEOLOGY A SCIENCE

This is the thesis of a Christian engineer. I have come to the belief that there is such a thing as a *Christian Discipline of*

⁴ S. P. Raju: *Improving Village Homes*—UNESCO & UNO Seminars.
S. P. Raju: *Smokeless Kitchens for the Millions*—CLS, Madras.
Rs.1/25.

⁵ S. P. Raju: *Crusade Against Village Poverty*—Report of a Seminar on Village Economics, April 1957.

S. P. Raju: *Bringing Better Life to the Village Millions*.

Engineering, in which engineering is looked upon as the science of discovering and utilizing the materials and forces of God's nature for the temporal service of mankind, constituting *diakonia*. Similarly I believe in the *Christian Discipline of Theology* as the science of religion, the science of discovering and utilizing the insights into the nature and power of God for the spiritual service of mankind, constituting *kerygma*. I also believe in the *Christian Discipline of Religion*. Religion is essentially a discipline of inter-relationship between God, man, society and Nature. And the religion of Christ provides the detonation of his redeeming power to release the enormous human potential that lies hidden in the village people for evolving a village society, that shapes its total life and work according to the Rule of God, constituting *koinonia*.

The building up of such a village society is the task of the Indian Church in relation to the village problems of India.

A personal word of reminiscence before I close. Over forty years ago after graduation in science I was awarded a government scholarship for engineering. I happened to attend a Y.M.C.A. Students Camp where I made a 'decision for Christ'. At that time it was considered that such a decision should result in joining 'Christian Mission Service'. I offered myself to a Mission, but was not accepted. Then I sought admission to the Serampore Theological College, but the Principal (the Rev. J. Howells) regretted there was no scholarship available. In the middle of the engineering course I decided to leave it for some other 'Christian service'. But a Christian Professor of my college from New Zealand suggested that I may complete the course: for, who knows, engineering may become useful in any technical work of the Church? He was prophetic!

After these long years to be called to the technical service of village people and the village Church, and to get an invitation from the same Serampore village, the shrine of a cobbler-theologian, for an article to its *Theological Journal* on the techno-theology and techno-theology of village problems sounds like a romantic story in God's 'mysterious way' of using men for His plans.